

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Public Information Department, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340

July 23, 1984

PRESS RELEASE

BYOBU: THE ART OF THE JAPANESE SCREEN
August 1 - October 14, 1984

On August 1, 1984, thirty Japanese screens, among the most beautiful and popular works in The Cleveland Museum of Art's rich Oriental collections, will go on view in the Lower Special Exhibition Gallery. Because they are fragile--ink and color on paper or cloth stretched over light wood frameworks--the screens can not be exhibited frequently. They are, as is the custom in Japan, brought out for viewing on a periodic basis, usually in the Japanese Screen Room, which can comfortably exhibit only four screens.

There are three basic formats in Japanese screens. The simplest and oldest is the single panel (tsuitate), heavily framed and set on a firm base, used at the entrance to a building or room to shield the interior. Sliding screens (fusuma) generally served as doors between rooms and provided broad expanses for paintings, often landscapes that could open up and brighten a room. The folding screen (byōbu) is usually made of two or six vertical hinged panels, less often of eight panels; when these hinged panels are placed in a zig-zag position, the byōbu has considerable stability and can stand by itself. Byōbu could serve as room dividers, protecting inhabitants from prying eyes or piercing drafts; as background for special occasions, such as the tea ceremony; or as sumptuous decorations for a room.

With one exception, the screens in this special exhibition are byōbu. (Other formats are on view in the Japanese Screen Room.) Seven are new, acquired since the last major exhibition of the Museum's Japanese screen collection in 1977. Michael Cunningham, curator of Japanese art, has organized this 1984 exhibition

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2-japanese screens

with an emphasis on byōbu of the Edo Period (1615-1868), with a few examples from the late Muromachi (1392-1573) and Momoyama (1573-1615) Periods.

Screens are a Chinese invention borrowed and transformed by the Japanese. The basic Chinese idea emphasized a screen's vertical panels decorated as a series of separate but related subjects. The Japanese changed this unit-by-unit vertical organization to a continuous horizontal composition, a change made possible by a new and ingenious technique for using paper. In place of the cumbersome leather or metal hinges which the Chinese had used to hold the panels together, the Japanese used interlocked and lapped paper hinges, allowing the paper surface of the screen to appear continuous. Panels could be connected to form a folding screen five feet high by twelve feet wide, a great horizontal sweep of space that invited artists to fill it.

By 1500 the Japanese were using the whole surface for a single composition. The earliest such paintings were done in Chinese style---that is, in subdued monochromatic ink tones and often of imaginary Chinese landscapes. Within a half a century Japanese taste had asserted itself in screens glistening with gold foil backgrounds for full-color scenes of birds and flowers or figures or landscape.

As the screen format evolved in Japan, artists began to use screens to express their personal styles and to sign them with their name or seal. By the Edo Period, relatively few Japanese painters remained anonymous. Only five screens in this exhibition are anonymous, and two of these predate 1600. The names will be unfamiliar to most Western visitors but they are revered artists in Japan: among them are Matsumura Goshun, Iwasa Matabei, Ogata Korin, Kano Tanyu, and Sakai Hoitsu.

Among the Muromachi masterworks are Shubun's Winter and Spring Landscape, a single six-fold screen from what was likely a pair of screens of the four seasons,

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3-japanese screens

fifteenth century, and Sesson's Tiger and Dragon, a pair of six-fold screens, sixteenth century. Both are monuments in the development of screen painting as the Japanese expanded the Chinese tradition of ink painting (suibokuga).

Thanks to the new wealth and patronage of the Momoyama Period, the art of painted screens flourished. Gorgeous touches of gold and color brushed in bold designs decorated the often gloomy households of warriors, nobles, and merchants. The Museum's collection includes a fine pair of folding screens called "Namban-byobu," representing the "foreign barbarians," Dutch and Portuguese traders and priests who were allowed to enter the port of Nagasaki on the southern island of Kyushu. (Most Japanese screens are to be read from right to left, but these, perhaps because they are a Western subject, are to be read from left to right.)

At the close of the Momoyama Period, Japanese decorative style reached its culmination: colorful, witty, daringly asymmetric, technically virtuosic, the screens of the Rimpa style are quintessentially Japanese. Cleveland's collection of Rimpa screens is particularly distinguished; among the masterworks on exhibition is the tsuitate by Sotatsu, one of only three screens believed to be by him in the West. Sotatsu originated the Rimpa style, establishing a grammar and vocabulary for all of his successors to follow. All of the Rimpa works in the exhibition are based on his great art, admired by the noblest, wealthiest, and most knowledgeable patrons of his and later times.

Like Sotatsu, Maruyama Okyo stands as the founder, innovator, and leading master of another major Edo Period tradition, one that is still alive today. His work subtly combines Western handling of space with the brush and nature symbolism of the Japanese tradition. Okyo's pair of screens Winter Day and Summer Night is a masterpiece of this type.

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4-japanese screens

An introductory illustrated booklet, written by Michael Cunningham, will be available free in the special exhibition. The September issue of the Museum Bulletin, published in conjunction with the exhibition, will be entirely devoted to Japanese screens. Its three articles, introducing the seven new screens, complement the 1977 catalogue; both will be available at the Bookstore.

Free films and lectures will accompany the exhibition. Three films on Japanese art and architecture are scheduled for 12:30 and 7:00 pm on three successive Wednesdays, beginning September 19. Museum staff will present gallery talks in the exhibition at 1:30 pm every day during the first week it is open, as well as at 7:00 on the Wednesday evening, August 2, after the exhibition opens and again on October 3 and 10 at 1:30 pm. Marjorie Williams, associate curator in the department of art history and education, is offering a series of four lectures, at 2:15 on Wednesday afternoons, beginning September 12. Dr. Sherman E. Lee, formerly director of the Museum and at that time chief curator of Oriental art, returns for a guest lecture on Sunday afternoon, September 23, at 1:30 pm; his topic is "Contemplation and Decoration in Japanese Screens."

For information on these programs and on a special family program on Saturday morning, September 15, call 421-7340, ext. 462.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.